

Reflections on *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*

By

Ann Marie Palmisciano

I first discovered the book *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead* by Brené Brown, PhD, LMSW (Penguin-Random House, 2012), when I viewed Dr. Brown's two-part lecture series (Oprah's Life Class) on the topic of vulnerability on Oprah Winfrey's television network (OWN). In these talks, the author speaks from her personal place of vulnerability, revealing that she intended to keep her work and career "small." Dr. Brown's TED talk, viewed by millions on the Internet, went viral, however, propelling her into un-anticipated, un-intended fame. *Daring Greatly...* continues to be Number 1 on the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Brown, who has dedicated the last decade of her life to studying, analyzing, and reflecting upon the theme of vulnerability, awakens a nation's conscience. She taps into a universal yearning, a hunger to connect, a longing to be heard, understood, and validated.

In this book, Dr. Brown begins a necessary, relevant, and healing conversation, especially in our times. At its root is the observation that we are social creatures. Although *Daring Greatly...* has some weaknesses, it also contains treasures worth exploring.

The book title was inspired by an iconic speech, entitled 'Citizenship in a Republic,' that Theodore Roosevelt delivered in Paris, France on April 23, 1910. Roosevelt's speech, which Dr. Brown uses to open her book, was about the courage to persevere in the face of failure and adversity and "to dare greatly" (Roosevelt 1910). We can choose to keep our world small or have the courage to dare greatly and be vulnerable. She reminds us that:

"Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of

engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection." (p. 2)

Daring Greatly... has a wonderful inter-disciplinary appeal with poetic, political, spiritual, philosophical, and sociological dimensions. For example, vulnerability is a *process* a spiritual *practice*, what Brown calls "living *Wholeheartedly*," or an "authentic life." Vulnerability is born from, and thrives in, a place of empathy and compassion and is the polar opposite of pity, selfishness, sympathy, and entitlement. Choosing vulnerability means embracing the risky, bumpy journey of a seeker-what Silvia Plath called in *The Bell Jar*, a search for "the unvarnished truth." Brown recognizes that vulnerability is *earned* over time, like trust, loyalty, and friendship. These are not gifts to be taken lightly or given away like free samples in a supermarket.

In focusing on the theme of vulnerability, Dr. Brown has her finger on the pulse of loneliness, isolation, and despair. With the skills of an archeologist, she excavates the human need for social engagement, interaction, connectedness, thereby, "bridging the gap" of what Mary Daly (1984) calls "the diaspora of women."

Dr. Brown discusses "armor" and the "arena." "Armor" refers to the walls we put up to protect ourselves from failure, rejection, and emotional harm. The "arena" is the context in which people practice vulnerability. Men and women face being vulnerable in radically different, diametrically-opposed, contexts. In a sexist and racist society, the glaring imbalance of power based on gender, racial, and other social differences determines how vulnerability can flourish, or continue to be unexpressed, 'go underground' like the protagonist in

Ralph Ellison's (1952) *Invisible Man*. Like women, men also suffer from "practicing vulnerability." Traditionally, boys have been taught, from an early age, to repress tenderness, sensitivity, love, and emotion. They are told that "big boys don't cry." Unfortunately, an inability to recognize the depths of gender discrimination clouds the lens through which we perceive the spiritual and psychological costs of "practicing vulnerability." Dr. Brown recognizes that "practicing vulnerability" can sometimes lead to a broken heart but never to abandoning *Hope*. She realizes that, in the end, one's choice to be in the "arena" is not only worth it but also necessary for human growth, evolution, and consciousness.

In *Daring Greatly...*, Dr. Brown distinguishes between "shame" and "guilt." She perceives shame as unhealthy, fruitless "self talk." In contrast, "guilt" serves as a sort of moral compass, keeping our values and ethics in check. Dr. Brown views guilt as a potentially positive map to guide one's life. Analyzed within the context of sexism, however, I disagree with her view that guilt can be healing and productive. In contrast, guilt functions to keep women stuck in vicious cycles of self-blame. I think that excessive guilt stunts women's minds like the bonsai tree in Marge Piercy's iconic poem, "A Work of Artifice" (1999). Although there are nuances between "shame" and "guilt," in my opinion, both distract women from feminist freedom.

A sociological strength of Brown's work is her observation on the importance of what she calls "self talk." "Self talk" is how we talk to ourselves, the unedited 'script in the head,' what we tell ourselves about our self esteem, self worth, confidence, and bravery. If, for example, women see ourselves as courageous survivors, "self-talk" opens the door to living, realizing, and actualizing that reality. In short, what we name ourselves, we become.

One of Dr. Brown's gifts is her seamlessness between data (quantitative) and countless hundreds of interviews (qualitative). Working in the grounded-theory methodology allows the interviews to speak for themselves. At the same time, recognizing this need for balance, objectivity, and neutrality is, in itself, a kind of a lens.

I also appreciate Dr. Brown's passages on "perfectionism." She reveals "perfectionism" as a false, narcissistic concept, a false construct. Brown clearly recognizes the deep divide between perfectionism and striving for scholarly excellence. Striving for excellence occurs not in spite of our flaws but because of them. Our shortcomings

are our finest teachers. In almost subliminal ways, this observation leads to understanding the differences between (hurtful) criticism versus the joy of critical thinking.

There are certain weaknesses in *Daring Greatly...* One weakness is that vulnerability lacks agency. It is not a neutral word or understood in a vacuum. Rather, vulnerability is contextual, "loaded." A second weakness is that Dr. Brown fails to recognize that, in a male-dominated society, women are groomed, coached and rewarded for being vulnerable. Exposing our salted wounds under patriarchy carries great spiritual and emotional risk, making women proverbial moving targets. Here are my wounds. Hurt me here. Third, Brown's use of the terms "folks," "us," and "people" to refer to both men and women masks the reality of sexism/patriarchy/gynocide. Thus, the dangers of sexism, racism, and classism go unrecognized. In an odd statement (intended to be humorous?) Brown proclaims "I am the patriarchy" (p. 95).

Despite its weaknesses, *Daring Greatly...* is a book that will inspire most readers from beginning to end. Some will find it a challenge to read. In either case, reading this book is, undoubtedly, worth the effort.

References

- Daly, Mary. 1984. *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Ellison, Ralph. 1952. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House.
- Piercy, Marge. 1999. *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Plath, Silvia. 1971. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Roosevelt, Theodore. 1910 (April 23). Speech on "Citizenship in a Republic" delivered in Paris, France.

About the Reviewer: Ann Marie Palmisciano earned her B. A. degree in Sociology and Political Theory from Providence College. Under the direction of Professor Mary Daly, she completed an M. A. in Political Theory and Feminist Philosophy from Boston College. Ms. Palmisciano also earned a second Master's Degree, an MTS (Master of Theological Studies) in Feminist Spirituality and Black History, from Harvard University. She is currently finalizing her manuscript of poems, entitled *psalms for Sophie*, which is a tribute to her mother.